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“Help Them Keep Doing What They’re Doing”: Intersections of Agency, Affect, and Capital in the Twitch Subscription System

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ABSTRACT With live streaming capabilities becoming increasingly important to the success of social media applications and representing central modes of engagement for popular digital platforms, the economic and socio-political functions of live streaming are critical to an understanding of changing new media landscapes. The existing scholarship on Twitch and similar live streaming platforms has demonstrated the importance of both financial investments and affective labor to these digital spaces. Building from existing scholarship, this article will apply a critical-cultural lens to analyze the ways in which Twitch’s interface mediates users’ agency through mechanics centered on affect, capital, and their intersections. How do emotional intimacies manifest across the design of the Twitch subscription system? How does Twitch incentivize live streaming subscriptions for both viewers and creators via design choices? What does this mean for an understanding of the affective investments that users have in live streaming more broadly speaking? Through an examination of the design-based affordances of live streaming on Twitch, I ask how these capabilities (to pay streamers via subscriptions and gift systems as well as to follow, comment, and otherwise engage) reflect the varying ways that intimacy is both created and understood in live streaming contexts. This work will contribute to an understanding of the affective investments that users have, express, and create across various new media platforms. It will particularly focus on how affective labor is both compensated and obfuscated via systems like the Twitch subscription.

KEYWORDS Twitch, affect, digital labor, live streaming

While video game live streaming platform Twitch was already enormously successful prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, its popularity boomed even more when users began to quarantine in 2020.[1] The existing scholarship on Twitch and similar live streaming platforms has demonstrated the importance of both financial investments[2] and affective labor[3] to these digital spaces. The body of research on Twitch has applied quantitative and qualitative methods and a diverse series of frameworks including uses and gratifications and parasocial interaction to examine how users are motivated to produce and consume live streaming content.[4] Building from existing scholarship, this article applies a critical-cultural lens to argue that Twitch's interface mediates users' agency through mechanics centered on affect, capital, and their intersections. In doing so, it brings the existing literature on Twitch's financial and affective exchanges in conversation with each other. Neoliberal promises of choice as an expression of agency manifest in digital contexts as a way to appease users and assure them of their autonomy despite platform dominance. This function is particularly apparent in the relationships between Twitch streamers and their subscribers, with the contradictory nature of parasocial love on viewers' end and capitalization on streamers' end highlighting how the behaviors of users of all kinds are manipulated to maximize Twitch's own profits. Despite this platform bias, I conclude that it is still possible for users to counter the platform's affordances in politically subversive ways. In short, agency on Twitch manifests not just as an illusion built by and into the platform itself, but also in the form of potential oppositional practices implemented by users.

There are several design-based affordances of live streaming capital exchange on Twitch. The mechanics that this article will focus on include traditional subscriptions (both individually paid and provided as part of the Amazon Prime Gaming package), the tier system of subscribing, and the exchanging of one-month subscriptions as gifts among users. Through an examination of the design-based affordances of live streaming on Twitch, I ask how these capabilities (to pay streamers via subscriptions and gift systems as well as to follow, comment, and

otherwise engage) reflect the varying ways that intimacy is both created and understood in live streaming contexts. This work will contribute to an understanding of the affective investments that users have, express, and create across various new media platforms. It will particularly focus on how user agency is offered and denied via systems like the Twitch subscription.

Technical features that emphasize the need for affective labor as a vehicle for the creation of good feelings among viewers are notable in contrast to and simultaneous coexistence with the harsh nature of some of the communication that happens on Twitch. Much scholarship has noted and discussed the role that harassment, trolling, and other negative exchanges have in interactions among Twitch streamers and viewers.[5] Despite this, the ongoing growth and subsequent mainstreaming of the platform has had the potential to diversify not only the types of streaming that it features (which now include and encourage a variety of non-gaming activities like streamers playing instruments, creating costumes, working alongside viewers during study- or write-ins, and "just chatting"), but also the variety of audiences brought in. This mainstreaming can be both for better and for worse and has the potential to both facilitate or attempt to circumscribe phenomena like platform harassment.[6]

Emotional intimacies manifest across the designs of live streaming platforms through linguistic and image-based expressions of affection. Platforms incentivize live streaming for both viewers and creators via design choices that emphasize both autonomy and expressions of affection. This means that users' affective investments in live streaming are inherently tied up in financial transactions like the Twitch Bit.[7] Monetary transactions on platforms like Twitch (particularly, in Twitch's case, the subscription system) are designed to be affective in the sense that they combine both embodied experiences and interior feelings to produce a sense of connected intimacy between viewers and streamers. This article's analysis of Twitch subscriptions therefore contributes to ongoing research by putting the Twitch literature on financial investments and affective investments in

conversation with each other, with my own contribution demonstrating how agential readings of Twitch must be informed by an understanding of the platform's intentionally limiting nature.

Affect and Affective Labor in Streaming

Conceiving of affect as the intersection of physical and psychological feeling on a collective level, this concept is a useful framework for understanding Twitch as a cultural phenomenon. The embodied nature of intimacy on Twitch is established both by the effect that streamers have or are assumed to have on viewers' bodies in the form of elements like physical attraction (see, for example, use of the derogatory term "titty streamers"[8]) and, less commonly but notably, by the effect that viewers can have on streamers' bodies. The latter can sometimes manifest more literally, as for example when streamers do things (at the sometime-request of viewers) like getting haircuts or tattoos live, often as challenges for or in celebration of reaching particular milestones on Twitch.[9]

Parasocial relationships are encouraged by Twitch not just through its more routine elements (like platform language that encourages intimacy, as discussed in more detail below), but also through features like TwitchCon Meet and Greets, advertised on the Twitch site with a picture of a fan posing with three streamers: "Come say hey, grab a pic, and get your merch signed by your favorite streamers!"[10] By evoking fan convention meet and greets where audiences can take photos with film and television stars, the TwitchCon promotion both recognizes the emotional investment and intimacy that characterizes real or perceived relationships between streamers and viewers and also seems to acknowledge the distanced nature of such relationships when streamers become so popular that they no longer evoke the casualness with which Twitch is more commonly associated. The parasociality that Twitch encourages in its viewers'

relations to streamers demonstrates the inherently limited nature of agency on the platform—it is impossible for viewers to achieve the level of intimacy they might want with streamers, just as it is arguably impossible for streamers to achieve the level of financial success they might want from the platform.

There is a tension between streamer as celebrity (indicated by the meet and greet promotion) and streamer as friend (arguably indicated by most other Twitch features). Ultimately, the distinction is primarily just the difference between very popular Twitch streamers and average Twitch streamers. As scholarship notes, Twitch is mostly known for and associated with its intimate, communal nature.[11] Channels like the enormously popular @CriticalRole are the exception to the rule, as so many tens of thousands of viewers tune in for those live streams that it would be virtually impossible to even follow the chat, much less contribute to an ongoing conversation in it as one might in a standard stream with much fewer participants (subsequently, larger streams are also associated with viewers providing less financial contribution to the streaming channel[12]). This comparative distance hardly matters to the larger live stream's broader sociality, though, as a sense of community is still evoked by watching the channel live with one's (tens of thousands of) fellow viewers, much like watching a new blockbuster film in a packed theater filled with excited fans or, as T. L. Taylor notes, like watching a live television broadcast in the vein of *Saturday Night Live*.[13]

All of these elements of the affective nature of Twitch reflect the important roles that both emotional and physical investments play in the platform's successful functioning. One of the differences between having Twitch on in the background (e.g. while working or doing errands) and having television on in the background is that the Twitch stream is intentionally made to feel like listening to a friend or friends playing games and/or talking about their hobbies, their jobs, and their lives. This is why, for example, users can write the "!lurk" command in certain chats to indicate to streamers that they are "lurking" and listening despite not contributing to the chat. However, another difference between the mediums is

that the economic structure of the Twitch stream only occasionally mirrors that of traditional broadcast television. While ads periodically run through Twitch streams for viewers who are not subscribed to the channel they are watching, viewers are also often encouraged to make other types of financial investment in their favorite streamers. These investments, whether in the form of subscriptions, "cheering" (tipping with "Bits," which are Twitch currency), or other types of payment, provide certain social benefits to the viewer while providing capital benefits to the streamer. These features of the platform represent its central offer of agency for users, that of a digital financial model in which viewers can serve as patrons to creators they want to support and streamers can make money off of their streams.

The language of Twitch consistently implores users to shape their behavior around what benefits the streamers they follow and view, assuming the successful creation of the parasocial relationships that are encouraged by both the platform and its streamers. These evocations include: "Support every month and Subscribe to help [streamer] keep doing what they're doing" (subscription benefits like access to special channel-specific emotes are identified as existing not because of the platform itself, but "As a thank you from [streamer]"), "Catch [streamer] right after this ad break; stick around to support the stream!", and "Cheer [tip the streamer with Bits] to support [streamer]." While Twitch itself seems to be perceived by most viewers as relatively neutral in its encouragement of their capital investment, likely given the extreme extent to which any and all forms of monetizing have become naturalized in social media platforms, the etiquette that many viewers seem to expect of streamers is very different. Marginalized streamers in particular are sometimes subject to harassment (in the form, for example, of YouTube compilations of "greedy streamers") if they complain or are perceived to be complaining about a lack of monetary compensation (i.e. they directly solicit subscriptions from their viewers outside of the platform's more culturally normalized "sub-athons"). This ultimately results in most streamers enacting affective labor by performing humility and gratitude in

order to please their viewers. They likely do so in part with the hopes of emulating successful users such as @broxh_, who went viral for trying to return a donation from a viewer near the height of Twitch's pandemic lockdown-driven surge in popularity.

A Twitch Ambassador as of 2023 (more on this in the next section), streamer @broxh_ is shown in YouTube versions of his viral 2020 live stream clip carving wood. A "sub train" begins, in which multiple viewers purchase and/or gift monthly subscriptions in short succession (Twitch refers to "hype trains," which include not just subscriptions but also other financial contributions like cheering with Bits, and the platform encourages this behavior with various "TwitchHypeTrain" emotes).[14] In the video, @broxh_ reacts to several audio notifications that indicate that a viewer has given gift subscriptions to some of the channel's audience members: "Wait, did someone gift some subs? Ah, bro, you didn't have to! Can I, um, give that money back? . . . Is there any way I can give the money back? Ah, you too . . . [laughs] Once again, I'm telling you, you don't have to sub, like, you don't have to. You can watch the stuff for free. Like, that's the best thing you can do. [laughs] Fuck, um, but please, hold on to your—oh, not a sub train emote. [laughs] Hold– can you, like– hold on to your money, we're in the midst of a lockdown. Use it on your family, not me. [laughs]"[15] The @ItsTwitch YouTube channel's version of this clip had over seven million views and 470 thousand likes as of March 2024. One of the video's top comments from user @hex720d7 has 6,300 likes and begins with the anecdote, "I've donated $50 to him and he returned it back."

@broxh_'s humility and generosity in returning or attempting to return the financial gifts he has received reflect two conflicting elements of Twitch culture. On the one hand, streamers are encouraged to view Twitch as a viable opportunity to become successful social media influencers, which makes @broxh_'s behavior counter to the platform's supposed function.[16] When viewers gleefully give him money, they do so without seeming to care about the fact that

they are ostensibly disrespecting his wishes. Some top comments under the YouTube video, for example, include @paltimpotampkin7647's "'You don't need to sub' 'You can watch this thing for free' Community: I'm about to start this man's whole career" (which has 9.8 thousand likes) and @emojicheckerofvibes2837's "'Can I give the money back?' Viewers: So you have chosen 10,000$" (which has 3.8 thousand likes). Twitch as a platform encourages and naturalizes financial exchanges to such an extent that viewers do not care to, and even feel that it would be insufficient to, express their love for their favorite streamers in any way besides through payment to said streamer (regardless of whether or not the streamer actually wants their payment). Indeed, streamers' lack of autonomy is reflected in the fact that they have no way of maintaining their affiliate status while disabling subscriptions on their channel; as one Reddit user said in response to the question, "Is there a way to disable your subscription button?": "Subscriptions are how Twitch takes their cut[;] allowing affiliates to disable them would be against their interest."[17] On the other hand, @broxh_'s behavior and viewers' reactions to it can be seen as emblematic of the extent to which affective labor is so integral to Twitch as a platform that it is necessitated even when streamers are ostensibly using the platform in the service of having fun, enjoying their hobbies, and being social with viewers, rather than making money. In short, a person playing games or enjoying hobbies with their friends would not need to make a point of asking said friends not to pay them for doing so; and simultaneously, said friends would not ignore their request and "force" more money on them in response. In the context of Twitch, @broxh_'s behavior is seen not as reasonable or to be respected, but as a "wholesome" marker of the streamer's goodness and purity, marking him as deserving of even more financial support. Despite this intrinsically financial element, users are still expected to view and treat the platform as an inherently social and interpersonal outlet (common refrains about @broxh_ indicate that he renewed a given viewer's "faith in humanity"), rather than an outlet for financial exchanges.

While the @ItsTwitch example of a YouTube video that reposts @broxh_'s viral exchange recognizes it for its "wholesome" nature per the title ("wholesome twitch streamer BROXH tries to give money back"), other YouTube versions of the clip make a point to contrast @broxh_ as a "wholesome" streamer with "greedy" Twitch users. One such video, which also has over seven million views and 387 thousand likes as of March 2024, begins with the creator narrating, "When it comes to streamers, I feel like there's two different types."[18] The video later cuts to a clip of a young woman streamer (@BadBunny) loudly saying, "a whole speech about how I need subs to keep this stream going if you like the content, blah, blah, blah. How [does] that result in zero subs? There are regular [viewer]s here! *Five! Dollars! A month!* How do you have *hours* of time to watch me and not *five dollars*? I don't know—what are you *doing* with your *life*, where you have *hours* of time to watch Twitch and not *five dollars* to provide for the content that you're watching?" The video then contrasts this with @broxh_ trying to return his donations. Notably, the first clip of the "greedy" streamer is twenty-seven seconds long (and picks up with the streamer being mid-sentence) in contrast with @broxh_'s one minute and four second long clip, which includes a bit more context. The compilation video creator concludes the video by saying, "If you were to choose one, which would you be? Hopefully . . . you'll make the right choice."

While the abrasive nature of the "greedy" streamer's presentation was criticized by many and received some tabloid news coverage, her words themselves reflect to an exacting degree the contradictions and inequities inherent in Twitch monetization.[19] The meritocracy myth of Twitch, which mandates "grinding" in its would-be success stories,[20] also reflects broader cultures of social media, aspirational labor, and the myth of accidental entrepreneurship.[21] Ironically, the streamer's anger at having produced hours of content in exchange for which she has not received the payment she expected is pointed to by acolytes of social media economic systems as the reason for her failure. If only she were not so "greedy," the implication of this video is, she would be rewarded for her good

behavior and “wholesomeness” with payment for her services, like @broxh_ was. Similar criticisms have been leveled at other streamers who complain about a lack of financial “support” from their viewers.[22] Notably, this often involves framing the streamer as having “asked” for money in the form of donations rather than in the form of income or payment for services rendered.

The pinned comment under the “Greedy Vs. Wholesome Twitch Streamer” video, which is from YouTube channel @Broxh and has been liked and replied to by the original video creator @Sweeneytv, reads, “appreciate the love brother, respect!” This version of the video and @Broxh’s comment on it are both notable for the seeming disconnect between upholding one streamer for their good, “wholesome” behavior while making a point to deride (and arguably encourage the harassment of) another streamer for their “greedy” behavior. (@Broxh does not appear to have commented on the wholly positive and “wholesome” @ItsTwitch version of his clip on YouTube, which does not make a point to contrast his behavior with that of other streamers; while this might be due to a series of factors including the element that @Sweeneytv is himself a fellow Twitch streamer to whom gratitude might be more expected, the shared visibility and popularity of the two videos nevertheless presents a notable contrast, given that one received a comment from the person whom the video featured and one seemingly did not). I note this not as an individualistic commentary or judgment on any of the users involved in this particular example, but as a useful case study in the cognitive dissonance that characterizes identification of “wholesome” and “greedy” behavior on Twitch, and more broadly speaking, the cognitive dissonance that characterizes users’ relationships with both affect and compensation on Twitch.

Capital and Financial Exchanges

Where emotion characterizes much of the rhetoric around Twitch exchanges as discussed above (with emphases on interpersonal phenomena like greed, generosity, and wholesomeness), another integral element of the platform is its inherently financial nature, even in seemingly social contexts. Characterizing capital exchanges as primarily *appearing* to occur between users, but in actuality almost entirely occurring as a flow from users to Twitch itself, I here want to highlight how affective frameworks in conversation with political economic approaches highlight key elements of the platform. The apparent agency that Twitch offers its users occludes the extent to which choice is inherently much more limited than it appears (on the most basic level, between not using Twitch at all, using Twitch and giving the platform ad revenue, or using Twitch and giving the platform subscription revenue).

The difference between the "wholesome" and "greedy" streamers, rather than having anything to do with their perceived sense of generosity or entitlement, has everything to do with the extent to which they recognize and acknowledge their platform transactions as being inherently financial in nature. The "wholesome" streamer is still recognized as such even if or when he passively approves the harassment of others because his "wholesomeness" is only determined by his treatment of the consuming viewer as customer, not his treatment of fellow streamers as competitors or coworkers. Conversely, the "greedy" streamer is derided for her explicit recognition of the economic system that characterizes Twitch. If she made money from the platform as streamers are expected to, by performing effusive gratitude for every subscription she received as if it were a donation rather than payment, she would be tolerated as a cog in the Twitch machine that sufficiently maintains its transactional nature. But by railing against viewers who get "hours of" entertainment and social interactions from her without paying her in return, she briefly removes the veil. This behavior seems to be

considered by offended users to be especially galling and unacceptable when it comes from marginalized streamers, in part because Twitch is already characterized by routine discrimination.[23]

Twitch streamers are expected to perform affective labor, manipulating their own behaviors for the express purpose of making their viewers happy, whether or not they are financially compensated in return. This expectation is partially upheld by the platform itself, because in order to become an Affiliate who can receive subscriptions, ad revenue, and Bit cheering in the first place, a streamer must reach fifty followers and an average of three viewers, among other things, both of which will necessitate a certain amount of affective labor that draws in and keeps the interest of viewers.[24] The expectation of uncompensated affective labor is also upheld by the cultures that users have created within Twitch, as when streamers like @broxh_ are, counterintuitively, explicitly financially rewarded by their viewers for their humble denial of payment.

The “greedy” Twitch streamer is “greedy” not because she wants payment in exchange for providing the platform and its users with content to consume, but rather because she recognizes and forces viewers to briefly recognize the fact that what she is doing is work rather than play, for which she expects to be paid per the terms of Twitch as a platform. What she ostensibly failed to recognize was that streamers are expected to quietly and humbly work without any payment for potentially indefinite periods of time in order to eventually be graciously rewarded with capital, for which they must perform subservient gratitude. Failure to do so marks a streamer not as an employee who is angry for not having received their paycheck, but instead as ungrateful, arrogant, and entitled. This is because Twitch as both platform and culture cannot function without obfuscation of both capital and its exchanges.

Obfuscation allows for and lends itself to potentially extreme inequities among streamers, even when we limit our consideration to only those streamers who are

successful enough to be Affiliates who have subscriptions enabled on Twitch in the first place. As is the case across industries in contemporary capitalism, major wage gaps and inequalities are likely the name of the game in Twitch streaming. This is possibly at least one cause of viewers' backlash against "ungrateful" and "greedy" streamers for their behaviors; if a viewer believes that a given streamer makes far more than they do, they will be understandably annoyed when that streamer asks for or seems to demand payment from them. This is another reason why payment is hidden in euphemisms like "cheering," "subscribing," and "gifting," which attempt to soften the inherently transactional nature of the exchange.

The existence of the Twitch Ambassadors guild to which @broxh_ belongs speaks to the high emphasis on affective labor that coexists with and even relies on the frequent obfuscation of Twitch's financial systems. According to the website, "Twitch Ambassadors positively contribute to the Twitch community—from being role models for their community, to establishing new content genres, to having inspirational stories that empower those around them, these creators embody what it means to #BleedPurple."[25] The benefits of being a Twitch Ambassador, which include having one's channel be promoted on the home page and being invited to TwitchCon, seem to be inherently financial in nature, but with no indication of the exact monetary amount that is associated with these features. As is the case with other elements of Twitch, this lack of capital visibility on the platform lends itself to various types of inequity, including most obviously the potential for large pay gaps among streamers based on race, gender, nationality, and other factors. One of the results of the potential for this inequity is that marginalized streamers in particular might be the subject of vitriol and backlash for real or perceived solicitation of payment.

The infrastructure of Twitch encourages viewers to see streamers as their friends while encouraging streamers to see viewers as their cash cows, from which they are entitled to take as much capital as possible, but simultaneously, to which they must constantly capitulate and perform appeasement in an elaborate illusion of

subservience. Given this, it seems inevitable that the dramatic disconnect between these coexisting elements of the platform will sometimes lead to painful reality checks and harsh subsequent conflicts.

Conclusion: Agency, Autonomy, and Personhood

By bridging the literature on Twitch's financial and affective elements, this article has demonstrated some of the broader implications of these areas of study. In the face of vulnerability[26] to doxxing, harassment, and other forms of control, whether corporate, interpersonal, and/or more broadly systemic, digital users turn to features like the Twitch subscription system in order to try to access a sense of autonomy that is both individual and collective. Whether or not various communities on Twitch are completely sincere or "real" does not matter as much as the extent to which they feel real for the people who turn to them. This is similar to some of the "wholesome" content that characterizes subgenres on platforms like TikTok. People turn to it in order to lay claim to a *feeling* of community and communal autonomy. So, in the face of extreme alienation caused by not just capitalism writ large but also by other forms of systemic oppression, users can (sometimes compulsively) consume things like wholesome content (as when a "TavernTok" fantasy character gives "you" a "hug" and tells "you" to go to sleep[27]) or participate in Twitch communities to try to have a sense of not just autonomy and control, but also a sense of personhood itself. Autonomy and control are important for users in the face of having little to no real control over platform politics, the latter of which both enable and encourage routine targeted harassment while maintaining a pretense of neutrality and benevolent objectivity. As Helen Thornham writes, "algorithmically vulnerable communities are those whose lives are overly determined by algorithms and automated systems, for whom the decision-making power of algorithmic systems is felt in a lived and

embodied sense, and who are conceptualised and identified ('dividuated') by systems in ways that rarely match up with their own sense of identity."[28] Platform politics that shape the very lived experiences of users themselves are both inescapable and oppressive (e.g. facial recognition technologies used to surveil public protests) and characterized by some potential for liberatory autonomy (e.g. the live streaming of those protests in the first place[29]).

In response to this algorithmic vulnerability, personhood and autonomy are claimed in a variety of ways. In the Twitch example, you are still real despite the fact that you might be dealing with a variety of systemic or (inter)personal issues, and the proof that you are real and a person lies in the fact that the Twitch streamer on your computer screen says *your* username and thanks you after you subscribe to them. You might feel a sense of autonomy and a sense of achieved goodness by helping this person. Whether or not they "really" needed your help, whether or not they make four times as much as you make in a year, they might feel like your friend whom you have helped, and in helping them, you might feel that you have made the world a slightly better place. This is both a potentially dangerous, politically subduing phenomenon, and also one that is seemingly completely unavoidable for some, if not all, participants in contemporary digital culture.

Ultimately, I believe that these elements of autonomy can and should be recognized as coexisting on Twitch. It is only natural that users will find ways to derive pleasure and hope from whatever systems they exist within. While it is important for us to recognize that Twitch as a platform exists not to connect users but to capitalize off of them, we can and should also recognize that users have the ability to make their own uses out of this platform and its monetizing features. Here and in future considerations, we might examine the relationships, overlaps, and distinctions among concepts such as mutual aid, digital sex work, and streaming labor.

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Author Information

Kelsey Cummings

Kelsey Cummings is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Christopher Newport University. Her research on new media and identity has been published in the journals *Television & New Media*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Social Media + Society*, *Studies in the Fantastic*, *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images*, and *Transformative Works and Cultures*.

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